

THE CHURCH
AND
CREMATION

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CHURCH LITERATURE ASSOCIATION
6 HYDE PARK GATE, LONDON, S.W. 7

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THE CHURCH AND CREMATION

THE traditional way of disposing of the mortal remains of Christians has been the method of burial in the earth. In the Prayer Book of the Church of England this is the only method for which provision has been made, except for the corresponding method of burial at sea. The practice of cremating the bodies of the dead has however greatly increased in recent years, and is likely to become more and more common. It is therefore desirable to review the principles of which account ought to be taken, and to give some advice on matters of practice, for those who are in some doubt as to what the attitude of Church people should be.

In this matter we have fortunately some official guidance from the Church, in that the Convocation of Canterbury in 1943 and 1944 adopted a series of resolutions on the matter. We shall have occasion to refer frequently to them.

THE CASE FOR CREMATION

“On social and hygienic grounds,” Convocation has said, “there is much to commend” the practice of cremating dead bodies. In days gone by, when most of the people, both of our own country and of other countries in Europe, lived in small village communities, the churchyards could be used century after century without indefinite expansion. The poor were often buried without coffins, and when coffins were used they were usually of a kind that would decay in a reasonable period of time. The ground in which bodies were buried was sooner or later used again for the same purpose, and Christian people were glad to think of the remains of their dead being laid within the shadow of the church where they had worshipped.

In more recent days, customs have greatly changed. It has, both in cities and villages, become common to bury the dead in coffins which will remain uncorrupted for long periods of

time, and to erect over graves monuments of stone of even greater permanence. Many of these monuments are of such a character that they will inevitably remain intact long after any personal memory of those who have been buried. It has become, in many people's minds, a social necessity to choose for such grave-stones the most enduring materials that can be afforded.

At the same time, the population of the country, and consequently the number of bodies to be disposed of, has greatly increased. Around the great cities vast cemeteries have become necessary. Even in villages, churchyard after churchyard has had to be closed to further burials, and new burying-places provided. Families look upon land in public cemeteries (and, with less reason, sometimes in churchyards) as their own freehold, in which none but their own dead may be buried. It is inevitable that it should be asked how long this process can continue.

To all this cremation offers an obvious alternative, though it may be pointed out that the erection of great columbaria for cremated remains demands a degree of permanence for the relics of the dead, for which few of our Christian ancestors looked.

THE CASE AGAINST CREMATION

Why has burial been the traditional practice for Christians? The most fundamental reason seems to have been the natural continuation by Christians of the first generations of the existing practice of the Jewish Church. To this was added the desire to do with the bodies of Christians what had been done to the Lord's own Body on Good Friday evening. These motives were sufficient to establish the practice of burial as universal, for it is in itself the simplest method of adequately disposing of dead bodies.

In some countries opinion against cremation has hardened, in that it has been used as a sign of rejection of the Church's offices. For this reason it is forbidden by Roman Catholic authorities. The (Roman) *Catholic Encyclopaedia*, for example states: "The legislation of the Church in forbidding cremation

rests on strong motives; for cremation in the majority of cases to-day is knit up with circumstances that make of it a public profession of irreligion and materialism." That is clearly not true in England, though the rarity of Christian references and inscriptions in some English crematoria do perhaps point to the fact that cremation was at one time chiefly used for the obsequies of unbelievers.

There is another reason alleged in the article "Cremation" in the *Catholic Encyclopaedia*: "The Church has opposed from the beginning a practice which has been used chiefly by the enemies of the Christian Faith. Reasons based on the spirit of Christian charity and the plain interests of humanity have but strengthened her in her opposition. She holds it unseemly that the human body, once the living temple of God, the instrument of heavenly virtue, sanctified so often by the sacraments, should finally be subjected to a treatment that filial piety, conjugal and fraternal love, or even mere friendship seems to revolt against as inhuman." It cannot however be claimed that it is true to-day, at least in this country, that there is any such revulsion of feeling against the practice, which indeed only does in a short time what natural processes otherwise do in a longer.

CREMATION AND THEOLOGY

It will be seen that the case against cremation, as stated by the writer of the article quoted, in no way rests on ultimate theological grounds. Whatever justification there may be for the Roman Catholic authorities to be reluctant to give approval to cremation does not apply in our own circumstances. Convocation has stated that "we attach no theological significance to the practice". In particular, it has rightly expressed the conviction "that the practice of cremation does not in any way affect the Church's belief in the resurrection of the body". It added: "Such martyrs as Polycarp who were burned to death did not thereby forfeit their hopes of the resurrection of the body; but their ashes were collected as far as possible, and buried out of reverence for that which had been the temple of the Holy Spirit."

We may therefore conclude, as Convocation did, that "Cremation of a dead body is lawful in connection with Christian burial or disposal in consecrated ground". We may add that when burial is used without cremation, it is desirable that coffins should be of less durable materials than are now commonly used, and that grave-stones might well be of a more modest kind than many now seen.

THE PRACTICE OF CREMATION

There are three kinds of procedure which are permissible to members of the Church of England, according to the Regulations of the Convocation of Canterbury. The Convocation of York has been slower in dealing with the matter, but the Canterbury Regulations are a safe guide in practice for all members of the Church of England.

Before considering the three kinds of procedure, it should be noticed that the Canterbury Convocation adopted the following recommendation: "Before the ashes are moved from the crematorium, a certificate should be given identifying the ashes as being the ashes of the actual body which had been brought to be cremated." It is important that in every case this stipulation should be observed. The priest ultimately disposing of the ashes should himself require to see the certificate.

We pass now to the types of procedure permissible in connection with cremation.

(1) "*The Burial Service in the church followed by cremation.*"

In this case, the ordinary funeral rites are observed with the dead body, cremation following as the preparation of the body for burial. When this is done, the body will be brought to the church, where the first part of the Burial Service will be used in full, together with all of the latter part of the Service except the actual committal, unless this latter part of the Service will be subsequently used at the burial of the ashes. It is clearly desirable that the holy Sacrifice should also be offered, and when this can be done at the same service, it is desirable that it should be after the first part of the Burial Office.

- (2) “ *Cremation followed by the full Burial Service at the church, the ashes being treated in the same way as the body.*”

In the second case, cremation, as a preparation for burial, will precede all the Church's burial rites. The casket will be set on a bier in exactly the same way as a coffin would be, and the Church's rites be used as for ordinary burials. The committal will then take place in the churchyard, as when a body is buried.

This second method of proceeding has so far been little used, but has much to commend it. It falls easily into line with ordinary practice, it ensures the reverent disposal of the ashes, and safeguards the Church's control of what is done with the dead body to the last.

- (3) “ *A Service at the crematorium followed by disposal of the ashes.*”

The third method permitted is presumably included to correspond with those occasions when funeral services are conducted at cemetery chapels. The subsequent disposal of the ashes should be in consecrated ground. It is irreverent, and contrary to proper Christian feeling, that they should be scattered over the surface of the earth. They should be reverently buried in consecrated ground, and it is desirable that the latter part of the Burial Service should then be used. There is a practical difficulty, in that this may not be on the same day as the Service at the crematorium. For this reason the second method of procedure has obvious advantages.

The Convocation added one further provision, that until such time as a common form of prayer for use at cremations is provided, a bishop may sanction such forms as he thinks fit, and give other directions to regulate the practice.

CONCLUSIONS

There is no need for members of the Church of England to look with suspicion on the practice of cremation, but since its use has been a modern development, there has not been the same effect of long-standing custom to maintain the reverence

with which the Church has always insisted the mortal remains of her members should be treated. When therefore Church people wish to make provision for cremation, they should take particular care in this regard. It is here suggested that the best way of doing this is to see that the second of the three kinds of procedure allowed by Convocation is the one to be followed.